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and Modern War Literature: From the Battle of
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Isabelle Brasme

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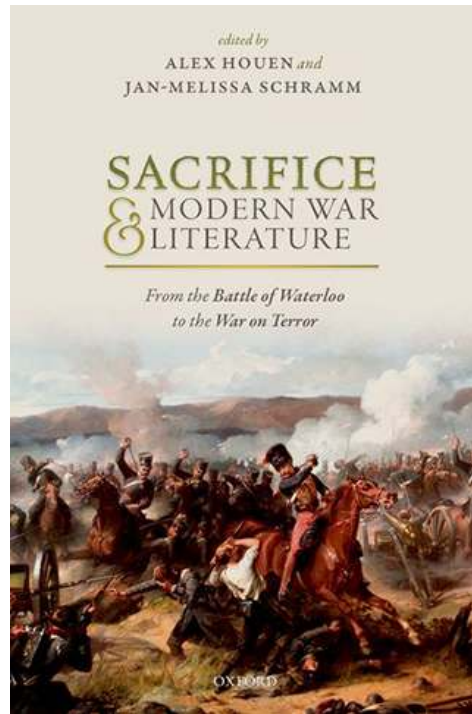
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- 1 The collection of fifteen essays that comprise *Sacrifice and Modern War Literature* aims at challenging the tendency that has prevailed for the past century to dismiss the notion of sacrifice when dealing with modern war literature, notably the cultural and religious values that were traditionally associated with it. The initial conference and resulting volume arose from the editors' realisation that whilst the notion of sacrifice had been much debated in cultural and social studies, it had hitherto not been analysed in scholarly monographs or collections focusing specifically on war literature.
- 2 Each chapter examines a specific conflict and its treatment by writers who were contemporary to the events. The temporal and spatial scope of the volume is thus strikingly large, dealing with conflicts as diverse as the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, and finally the 'War on Terror'; and examining works ranging from Wordsworth, Dickens, and Whitman in the nineteenth century; to Kipling, Aldington, and Yeats in the early twentieth; Beckett, Sartre, and Heaney in the second half of the twentieth; and contemporary authors such as Loraine Adams, Nadeem Aslam and James Meek.
- 3 The extended timeline and the wide range of authors under consideration in this volume allow to highlight both elements of permanence and change in the way sacrifice has been considered and represented in war literature over the past two centuries. These shifts and continuities operate along two major axes. The first one is that of the sacred, in keeping with the etymological meaning of 'sacrifice', and is related to an ideal, be it religious or secular; the second is that of an economic, industrial rationalism of the loss of lives versus a military and political gain. The volume's introduction provides a rich theoretical framework to approach the question of sacrifice in war literature since the nineteenth century. The authors first highlight the prevalence of Christianity in the early nineteenth century, with Christic self-sacrifice as a pivotal element. Such faith was deeply communal, and a powerful tool in sacralising the people's participation in war. Although the rise of positivism and scientific thought over the course of the century dealt durable blows to the nation's faith, the desacralisation process was never final. This is made manifest in First World War literature: despite the reservations expressed by notable poets, Christic imagery is omnipresent in war poetry and fiction. The shift is rather from an allegiance to the Church to a more individual form of religious sacrifice. This perspective also applies to later conflicts. The religious tropes permeate secularised renderings of wars, such as those made by Marxist or Anarchist writers. They allow to tap into the tragic mode as a way to shape representations of war.



- 4 The common feature and strength of each chapter is that they all examine the intersection of personal experience and historical events in relation to war sacrifice; each chapter focuses on the intimacy inherent in the writers' rendering of the war—both as regards the act of witnessing sacrifice, and the attempt to make this experience in turn intimate to the reader. In the first chapter, Philip Shaw thus delineates the constant interweaving of religion and war in Wordsworth's poems on the Battle of Waterloo. He highlights the deeply theological undercurrent of these poems, as they explore the connection between slaughter, sacrifice, and divine will. Shaw also focuses on the way in which history resonated with Wordsworth's experience in France and his personal sacrifice as regards Anne Vallon and their daughter. This interconnection of the familial and the political is also examined in chapter 2, where Jan-Melissa Schramm investigates the paradigm of self-sacrifice in Dickens's *Little Dorrit* and *A Tale of Two Cities* to vectorise both the personal and historical events of the novel. The chapter emphasises the influence of the Crimean War over Dickens's narrative choices. In chapter 3, which focuses on the Indian Mutiny of 1857–59, Christopher Herbert highlights the rewriting of events by missionaries such as the Revd William Butler to allow for a victimisation of the British that grants them a holy status, particularly in the context of rising Evangelism in Victorian Britain. Conversely, the fictional accounts of the Mutiny, appearing at a temporal distance from the events, tend to replace the sacrificial interpretation of the war with a 'dejingozed' vision of British bloodlust. Likewise, Steve Attridge's examination of narratives of the Boer Wars delineates a growing tension between communal sacrifice and an increasingly individualised form of heroism. In the context of an increasing criticism of the British leaders, the celebration of consensual sacrificial victims tends to be replaced by the glorification of rebel heroes; these heroes' individualism is sometimes punished by the state, thus complicating the traditional paradigm of the sacrificial hero with the motif of scapegoating. Sacrifice here becomes 'part of a personal code and not a national imperative.' The next two chapters, written respectively by Vincent Sherry and Tim Kendall, explore the way in which the traditional notion of sacrifice is challenged and secularised by the scale and the industrial, systematic mode of killing of the First World War. In many poems and works of fiction on the war, the model of individual sacrifice inherited from eighteenth-century thinking and neo-classical poetry is exposed as irreconcilable with the mass slaughter characterising modern war. Using Agamben's *Homo Sacer* as a starting point, Sherry thus argues that sacrifice in First World War literature can be represented through either an 'obvious' or a 'subtle' mode, the latter operating via the figure of the '*abject hero*'. He focuses on Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, Jones's *In Parenthesis*, and Ford's *Parade's End*. Matthew Campbell likewise considers the shift in the heroic mode through martyrdom and scapegoating in his examination of Dora Sigerson's response to the Easter Rising.
- 5 The later chapters are devoted to areas beyond the scope of the *Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens*. Ian Patterson highlights the continuities between the treatment of the First World War and of the Spanish Civil war, especially in terms of self-sacrifice and martyrdom, illustrated in the rekindled interest in tragedy and tragic heroes. Mark Rawlison's chapter establishes that sacrifice comes to be increasingly represented by writers of the Second World War in terms of an industrial rationalisation of costs and benefits; whilst Helen Goethals's chapter on the poetry of the Second World War qualifies this assessment by pointing out the continued appeal to mythology and religion in T. S. Eliot's, Edith Sitwell's and Dylan Thomas's verse. The later chapters all

examine the question of the internalisation of sacrifice and the growing focus on an intimate sacrificial relationship to conflicts.

- 6 This survey demonstrates the temporal and spatial breadth of the volume. One is initially led to wonder whether such a far-reaching scope can allow for an in-depth analysis of the question of sacrifice in non-fictional, fictional and poetic writing on modern war. Despite the unavoidable constraints that a single volume dedicated to such a rich topic must have generated for the authors, *Sacrifice and Modern War Literature* brings a new and welcome salience to forgotten or overlooked elements of war literature. In particular, the various essays bring to light common features, continuities, but also developments in the notion of sacrifice in war literature over the past two centuries. The most impressive and commendable merit of this volume is the constant dialogue that is palpable between the various chapters. This is not a mere 'collection' of miscellaneous essays, but the result of a genuine and fruitful collaboration and discussion between the fifteen authors. Despite their wide range, the introduction and chapters thus bear a striking cohesion; this volume is certain to become a landmark within studies on war literature, and more largely on vulnerability and the intimacy of sacrifice.
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